Testing in schools has not been without controversy, both in history and recent times. While this summary is not exhaustive by any means, it captures some events over time that have impacted testing, and therefore education.

Reaching far back to the 1800s, students used to show their knowledge at exhibitions. They would spend time memorizing Bible passages and other texts, and then recite what they knew. Memorization, not understanding, was emphasized, and the public evaluated schools based on their impressions of the students they saw during these public events.

This all changed when Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe called for reforms to the Boston Public Schools. Howe, a phrenologist (and founder of Perkins’ School for the Blind), thought too much memorization was bad for the brain, and that students needed to think, analyze, and reason. Both men were dissatisfied with the inequities in the quality of education among wealthy and poor students in Boston and the harsh corporal punishment that was common at the time. They wanted increased training for teachers, a superintendent of schools to lead from a centralized office, and written tests. They were also challenging the elite status of “masters”—highly paid men who led the schools. These masters kept their positions based on the performance of only the top achievers in their schools (evaluators only observed the learning of these students, not the whole student body). This struggle between the status quo and reformers became a politicized issue; the masters and their supporters in government sought to keep their power, and the reformers fought to gain a foothold into positions where they could achieve their goals.

Eventually Horace Mann became the secretary of the Board of Education, and in 1845 school evaluators administered an unannounced written test to all pupils in Boston’s schools. The resulting poor overall student performance on these tests revealed weaknesses in the quality of education students were receiving and questioned the existing assumption that Boston schools were doing well. However, Howe’s hope to decrease the amount of didactic teaching did not come to pass—these written examinations actually reinforced this type of practice, as teachers taught so their students would pass the test. After the events in Boston, written testing became more widespread in the United States; report cards and grading in schools would soon follow.

The end of the nineteenth century and into the early 1900s saw the rise of statistical analysis. Psychologists were trying to make mental activity into a science. As this field developed standardized achievement and intelligence tests were created to diagnose those with learning problems; at this time, it was thought that intelligence was a fixed trait and it could be objectively measured. Eventually these tests became used to sort and classify individuals. They were used in World War I to test military recruits, which propelled their popularity. By the 1920s the tests had entered schools, and the curriculum became exam-driven. Initially teachers hoped that tests would elevate their profession, but this was not the case.

Au (2011) describes how Bobbitt applied Taylor’s process of scientific management to schools in the early 1900s. Taylor devised this system to be used in factories, and it was a method that gathered information about employees’ work, analyzed it, and figured out the most efficient way to do the work based on the data that was collected. The result of this process was workers being told exactly how to do every part of their jobs. This was applied to education by having administrators tell teachers what to do in their classrooms, and administering tests to students to determine weak and strong teachers.

There was opposition to the standardized testing movement among student-centered theorists such as John Dewey, who were concerned that the tests would narrow curriculum and take the focus from learning and on to passing tests. Despite the protests testing continued. Testing then, as it is now, was a contentious issue tied up in politics.

Those were the early roots of standardized testing and its place in schools. Fast forward many years to 2001, and we saw the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This was a bi-partisan measure with stated goals of reducing the achievement gap between wealthier and poorer school districts. This was to be done by requiring schools to administer a statewide standardized test each year, with consequences for schools who did not make adequate progress. The tests were “high stakes,” meaning that performance was linked to consequences for schools. NCLB elevated and cemented the tests’ placement in schools as they became a federal mandate. Proponents noted the overall improvement in test scores over the years, while opponents asserted that curriculum in schools was being narrowed to only what was tested, which was a set of decontextualized, isolated skills. Since there was so much pressure to do well on the tests, teachers were “teaching to the test”—teaching so their students would pass the test, and as a result the quality of curriculum content and the autonomy of teachers to meet diverse student needs declined. Even when NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeed Act in 2015, the tests have remained a presence in American classrooms.

The assessment research presented in this section of the webiste is a move away from standardization toward a learner-centered approach to assessment. It calls for a more balanced approach, and cautions against relying on only one measure to determine the success of students, teachers, and schools. Project-based learning is an instructional strategy that supports this balanced view of assessment, and links to that specific pedagogy follows this section.

(Au, 2011; Giordano, 2007; Parkerson & Parkerson, 2017; Reese, 2013; Shepard, 2000)